

HFMA Career Center

Effective Communication: Avoiding the Apocalypse

Success in the workplace requires teamwork and effective collaboration. The foundation of effective teamwork and cooperation is of course the ability to handle disagreement and conflict.

Disagreement and conflict may be expected in any relationship. Conflict is actually normal, and ideally can serve people with different needs and interests work together. It is how conflict is handled that determines a relationship' success. There are clear signals of distress in relationships. University of Washington researcher John Gottman uncovered four clear indicators of relationship failure that he's dubbed the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". The presence of any one of the four Horsemen indicates the conflict is not being dealt with constructively or productively. Below is a brief summary of each of the horseman.

The first Horsemen: criticism

Criticism is not the same as providing constructive feedback. Criticism in its most troubling form focuses on the individual's personality, character, style and interests rather than specific actions or behaviors that may need to be changed. This is in effect, simply going after someone.

In offering feedback it is helpful to plan ahead. Make sure that what you are going to say is constructive. It's best to focus feedback on a single specific behavior. Feedback is never given on a person's personality or character. Criticism is appropriately directed to processes and outcomes not "flesh and blood".

The second Horsemen: contempt

Contempt is open disrespect of others. Contempt often involves comments designed to take another down, embarrassing them. Contempt can embrace indirect forms such as rolling the eyes or attempting to wrap insults in humor.

The root of contempt is lack of interest in others. If this lack of interest is unavoidable in the relationship, the relationship may be in peril. There then needs to be focus on managing the relationship itself. People who manage relationships well understand the benefits of connecting with many different people. Common ground is a commodity to be sought and cherished.

The third Horsemen: defensiveness

Denying responsibility, making excuses, deflecting negative feedback to another, is problematic because the defensiveness prevents reaching any resolution to problems. Defensiveness accelerates anxiety and tension. The focus here needs to be on understanding the other person's perspective so you can work towards mutual ground. Yes, you must be calm and open-minded.

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The fourth of Horsemen: stonewalling

Stonewalling is shutting the discussion down by refusing to respond. Examples of stonewalling include feigned certainty, emotional distancing and physically walking away from conversations with others. It is problematic in that it aggravates the person being stonewalled and is NOT a solution to conflict.

The key to overcoming stonewalling is to participate in the discussion. If need be, ask the other person for the time you need to reflect and utilize that time. Maintain eye contact and a forward position. Bring the other person into the discussion and listen. Remember, participating in discussion and working together to resolve the conflict are the only ways to keep the relationship from crumbling.

How to keep the four Horsemen from taking control

There is a very simple technique for effectively addressing conflict. Gottman states that the technique is natural and is present in all conversations. It is known as a "repair bid". A repair bid is any pause or break that allows for a refocusing of the conversation. It is an attempt to restore equilibrium. A repair bid can be anything from a pause and down-cast eyes to silence to suggesting a compromise to using humor to break the tension to voicing respect for the other party. Conversations can get off-track. When it's off-track it is time to refocus and fix the situation. The power of the repair bid is that it can be a deliberate, conscious choice to step back, assess the situation and begin the repair work.

In choosing to employ strong communication skills, you send the signal that you believe other people are important to you, you respect what they can do and you put relationships ahead of self-interest. Relationships can become strained with discord. The solution however is simple and a matter of choice -communicate.